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AUTHOR Lewis, Marvin A.
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a thematic examination of three novels by Hispanic minority writers. In their assessment of the human condition, Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban exile writers share many co rns. Among them are the problems of ethnicity, alienation, and identity. These preoccupations are manifested primarily through character portrayal in which efforts are made to confront a hostile society which often judges a person by the color of his skin or the language he speaks. In a fictional interpretation of reality, many factors are often shown to lead to the estrangement of individuals from self and society. From this discussion, it is possible to glimpse at what happens when Hispanic minorities confront the social order in the United States. The outcome is not encouraging. In the Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban exile experiences, pressures are placed on individuals to conform to existing standards rather than to maintain their ethnic identity within the host country. From the literary point of view, the majority culture is as insensitive and as unyielding as ever. While this study is limited to specific works, analogies can be made with others expressing similar concerns. (Author/AM)

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# ETHNICITY, ALIENATION, IDENTITY: THEMES IN HISPANIC MINORTIY FICTION

BY

MARVIN A. LEWIS

In their assessment of the human condition Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban exile writers share many thematic concerns. Among them are the problems of ethnicity, alienation, and identity. These preoccupations are manifested primarily through character portrayal in which efforts are made to confront a hostile society which often judges one by the color of his skin or the language he speaks. In their fictional interpretation of reality, many factors are often shown to lead to the estrangement of individuals from self and society, frequently questioning one's place in the Universe. The tendency persists in the prose, poetry, and drama dealing with Hispanic minority groups in the United States. Puerto Ricans are unique due to the fact that they are a minority here and a majority there. However in a great deal of fiction, Mainland and Island experiences are virtually inseparable.

A thematic examination of three representative novels will reveal the degree to which the above motifs are reflected. I will briefly examine the following works: Joseph V. Torres-Metzgar, Below the Summit (Chicano); Pedro Juan Soto, Hot Land, Cold Season (Puerto Rican); and Ramiro Gómez Kemp, Los Desposeídos (Cuban). While the study is limited to these specific works, analogies can be made with others expressing similar concerns.

Many definitions of ethnicity, alienation, and identity exist. In order to clarify my terminology, I have taken the following working definitions from standard sources:

1. Ethnicity - implies the existence of a distinct culture or subculture in which group members feel themselves bound together by common ties and are so regarded by other members [illegible]embers of the society... Ethnic groups are inherently

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ethnocentric, regarding their own cultural traits as "natural", correct and superior to those of other ethnic groups, who are perceived as odd, amusing, inferior or immoral.[1]

2. Alienation (or estrangement) is the act or result of the act, through which something, or somebody, becomes (or has become) alien (or strange) to something, or somebody, else ... In contemporary psychology and sociology it is often used to name an individual's feeling of alieness toward society, nature, other people, or himself.[2]

3. Identity is the temporally persisting sense of being the same person whereby the individual orients himself to the external world.[3]

The concepts are different in definition but quite closely bound together in the portrayal of human experience in the writers under consideration.

## BELOW THE SUMMIT

Joseph V. Torres-Metzgar's novel is set in rural West Texas and traces six months in the life of Reverend Robby Lee Cross, a Baptist preacher and cutlery salesman. Cross's exploits are narrated in third person and deal with interactions with his neighbors and family. The central conflict revolves around Cross's problems with his wife María Dolores and with his religion. A literal interpretation of the Bible coupled with jealousy on Cross's part results in tragedy. He brutally murders María for adultery without realizing that she has been raped, and dies during a wild flight from the scene. Below the Summit is at the same time an indictment of small town Texas and an exploration of pressures experienced in an inter-

ethnic marriage.

Early in the novel it becomes evident that the Cross marriage of ten years is based upon hypocrisy. María is Mexican American but is forced to sublimate her ethnic identity as one of the prerequisites for being married to Cross, a WASP. In addition to being isolated one hundred miles from Geneva Gap, the nearest town, she does not attend church, and does not speak Spanish in the presence of her husband. Unfortunately María never really realizes what is happening to her. After a miscarriage late in the novel she begins to decline physically and mentally. "She couldn't understand. She was in an alien land, alone, despised, friendless."[4] María is butchered shortly after making the decision to leave Cross for a better life.

Circumstances surrounding the marriage are rare. Cross's father is vehemently opposed to the union.

> "Ma son marryin' up with a Mexican," she had heard him say over and over again between the abusive four letter words.
>
> "Why Mexicans ain't even white folks," he had scoffed.
>
> "If'n they ain't white, Babtiss, and from this heah Texas, they ain't worth a damn - yuh hear?"
>
> "She's of pure Spanish stock," Lee had said. "She isn't Anglo, but she's white as you are. Her ancestors were here in Texas long before your daddy and his daddy even thought of coming here. She's no mestizo, no half-breed, no Indian's thrown in somewhere to corrupt her blood. She's no Mexican, daddy! She's white European like you and me."
>
> "We ain't white European, boy! We's white, Babtiss, Texas-Americans! That's what and that's all and that's the best

goldang stock!"[5]

In an absurdly hilarious assessment of the ethnic situation in Texas, father and son demonstrate their ignorance and ethnocentricity. Comments such as María being of "pure Spanish stock", "no mestizo", "no half-breed" are quite ironic when one takes into account the genetic exchange incurred in Spain and America as a result of invasions and conquests which took place over the centuries. The inherent social contradiction here is that even if María's family is Spanish, they still live on the other side of the tracks and are Mexican in the eyes of the majority culture.

These attitudes are representative of a system of values maintained by Texans in Geneva Gap and environs in relating to their Mexican American neighbors. Mexican Americans are looked upon as an inferior and conquered people whose destiny is to be subjugated by the Texans. María Dolores is but one indication of this tendency. One of the novel's basic concerns is with her demise embodied in her alienation and loss of identity. Underlying all of these considerations is the question of ethnicity which is treated in two basic ways. In the first place Texas WASPS are seen as the chosen people or the highest civilization there is. Secondly, the concept of miscegenation, or inter-ethnic marriage and child bearing, is presented in a negative light. In Below the Summit Chicanos are victims of this ethnocentrism.

Three characters of inter-ethnic unions are evident in the novel: Danny Cross, Corazón Dankhaus, and Coyote Jameson. At the end of the book Danny goes to live with his grandparents in Mexican Town. One can only guess what the future holds for him. Corazón is a teacher who is mentioned once by local males as a possible sex object. Her name though, just as

that of Coyote Jameson, suggests a certain incongruity. Coyote is a different story since he feels the effects of racism and reacts against it. His dilemma is summed up by his friend Doctor Serveto.

> His language was a little too forced whether he was speaking Spanish or English. The truth was that Coyote Jameson was an outsider, welcomed neither by one or the other of the blood lines from which he sprang. This caused him to be rebellious and belligerent and eccentric when viewed by the conventional people on both sides of the tracks. Consequently, he was a loner.[6]

Coyote becomes a protegee of Doctor Serveto, a Chicano activist, in their fight against injustices. Coyote develops a social consciousness which is manifested in strikes, boycotts and other acts of civil disobedience. Throughout, however he is presented as a misguided outsider who doesn't fit into society because he is in ethnic and cultural limbo. Coyote is portrayed as being the victim of a negative mestizaje who leads a dual existence in terms of language and blood lines.

Characters are well defined in the novel. Robby Lee Cross is an excellent portrayal of bigotry, racism and religious fanaticism. Unfortunately he religiously reflects the views of his community. He unsuccessfully attempts to reconcile the world of the flesh with the one of the spirit.

Dr. Serveto is a committed Chicano intellectual who tries to reach the minds of students at Cal Davis College by exposing them to different theories concerning race and the human condition. In so doing he alienates

both students and townspeople. His emergence as a primary character is skillfully handled. Throughout the novel the author provides bits and pieces of information about him until his full fledged identity as a Chicano is established. The first general reaction to him is, "Name's Serveto, yuh know. Probably Eye-talian or somethin' like that."[7] This is in stark contrast to his final defiant act of giving a lecture on "The Sacred Cows of Texas" before the Geneva Gap Chamber of Commerce. In his speech Serveto commits an act of heresy by attacking the revered longhorn, the Alamo, and racism and chauvinism. Needless to say, he is dismissed from the University. Dr. Serveto is important in the novel because he constantly affirms the right of Chicanos to exist as an ethnic group without being at the mercy of Texans in Geneva Gap and elsewhere.

Below the Summit presents a tragic view of the human condition. The major characters all end with death or defeat. Chicanos and Anglos are shown to be in constant conflict, with the majority culture demanding conformtiy and subordination. At the book's end there is no indication that conditions will change in the future.

## HOT LAND, COLD SEASON

Pedro Juan Soto's novel recounts efforts by eighteen year old Eduardo Díaz, a Puerto Rican, to gain insight into his past. Eduardo was born in Puerto Rico but has not returned since childhood. He goes on vacation from New York to visit his brother Jacinto who abandoned New York three years earlier. Eduardo's planned month of leisure ends abruptly when he discovers that neither his past nor his future exists there for him. After a week Eduardo returns to New York, thoroughly confused and

disenchanted, because he does not possess the correct mental attitude to understand his peculiar set of circumstances. His identity quest structures the novel's basic thematic thrust.

Eduardo's problems begin even before he reaches the island. A tourist asks whether he is a Puerto Rican, which to Eduardo is an absurd question. On arrival at the airport a luggage clerk refers to Eduardo as that "American kid". This also unsettles him.

Language becomes an obstacle for Eduardo. At times he does not know whether to speak English or Spanish and consequently does neither well. Jacinto chastises him for using slang words and speaks for the population in general when he points out deficiencies in student speech: "They don't even know Spanish very well, so how can they learn good English?"[8] Jacinto is a nationalist who realizes that "There's a very close connection between this question of language and the political destiny of Puerto Rico, ..."[9] Therefore, he holds purist views for both Spanish and English.

Language is but the starting point in the ethnic-cultural dilemma of Eduardo. His language "problem" leads to others which are as serious. In a meaningful conversation with Jacinto, Eduardo raises a crucial issue.

> "But my question is this," Eduardo interrupted him. "If I'm an American, a gringo, a Yankee down here, and up north I'm a Puerto Rican, a spik, what in hell am I <u>really</u>, Jacinto? Who am I? And where do I belong?" he said, breaking into English.[10]

Eduardo is presented as being caught in the middle of two cultures- United States and Puerto Rican. But since Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States, where does the problem lie? It is primarily one of ethnicity

which involves language, color, and other aspects of culture. The irony presented is that each side can utilize the external status of the Puerto Rican as a denial of his true being which results in confusion. At the moment Eduardo doesn't realize that he may be forced to make a choice, either become more oriented toward the gringo world, or remain a spik , or enjoy the best of both worlds without guilt. Cultural pluralism will provide the latter alternative.

In his assessment of the ethnic situation, the author touches upon the topic of out-group marriage and miscegenation. Eduardo's sister Lavinia has married Freddy, an Italian, and their offspring, Ralphie, is a demon as Eduardo can attest.

> And he thought of his nephew Ralphie, that delicate monster; he remembered him standing in the middle of his sister's living room, as rigid as a board, with the vein standing out in his little red neck, shouting "Speeky spik, you!" at Lavinia, not yet realizing- he was only six- that he was as much of a "Speeky spik" as his mama. His uncles on his father's side, who had never approved of Freddy's marrying Lavinia, had given him racist notions and done their best to make him think he was as Italian as Garibaldi or Impelleteri." [11]

Lavinia is immediately caught up in Freddy's brand of ethnocentrism and withdraws from contact with her family, subordinating her desires to those of her husband. The pattern is much the same as with María Dolores in

Below the Summit. The whole process of inter-ethnic marriage is looked upon as wreaking havoc upon the extended family. Miscegenation, it seems, destroys ethnic and cultural identity. Eduardo is aware, too, of other family problems such as his father's alcoholism and his sister-in-law's desire to return to the United States.

Eduardo's odyssey takes him to his former neighborhood where he sees old faces that have changed for the worse. When the realization concerning his destiny is made Eduardo's audience is, ironically, the deaf mute Farón. Farón, former playmate, is able to relive some significant childhood memories with him but is not quite able to comprehend Eduardo's problems of adulthood.

> But Farón was lost now. He shook his head like a dog being played with and merely smiled at him. It was no use. Everything was useless: coming here, thinking that he had found peace again, believing that the past could be revived. It was all useless.[12]

Eduardo flees Puerto Rico as a rejected child might. There is no indication that his dilemma has been resolved since he is just as estranged from self and from both cultures as he was in the beginning. There is some indication, though, that Eduardo will make the best of life in the United States.

Hot Land, Cold Season is an indictment of the System. At the basis of the novel is criticism of the peculiar relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico which is based upon neo-colonialism and dependency. Such a system denies some Puerto Ricans even the right to know who they are.

## LOS DESPOSEIDOS (THE DISPOSSESSED)

Ramiro Gómez Kemp's novel analyzes experiences of Cubans on the island and as exiles within the U.S. context. According to Seymour Menton several other novels and "Los desposeídos provide the opportunity for criticism of the consumer society with its dehumanized life, drug addiction and sexual immorality."[13] The novel is concerned primarily with the unadaptability of certain exiles to U.S. life.

The Zaldívar family is the center of attention. It consists of don Agustín, the banker, Arnaldo-son, and Teresa-daughter. Arnaldo, focal point of much of the activity, is educated in Miami before and after the Revolution. The novel's initial pages say quite a bit concerning the social order in Cuba. The Zaldívar's house is described as

> Rodeada de amplios y bien cuidados jardines, la casa se alzaba en la avenida central del más aristocrático barrio de la Habana, Miramar. Esteban, el viejo jardinero negro, abrió las pesadas verjas, con una blanca sonrisa luminado el oscuro pergamino de su rostro.[14]
>
> (Surrounded by large and well kept gardens, the house was situated on the central avenue of the most aristocratic barrio of Havana, Miramar. Esteban, the old black gardener, opened the heavy gratings, with a white smile lighting up the dark parchment of his face.)

Also very prominent is Eulogia, "la sirvienta mulata"(the mulata servant). From this brief glimpse blacks and mulatos seem to be occupying the traditional servile positions in society. Teresa drives a sports car and spends much time at the yacht club which amounts to a fairly frivolous existence. The advent of the Revolution changes much of this and the children, and later

the father, seek refuge in the U.S.

Arnaldo learns that certain compromises in values are necessary if one is to succeed. Both Arnaldo and Teresa enjoy superficial success under the capitalist system but are not able to deal with all of the social and financial ramifications. Arnaldo discovers that his relationship with the company is one of convenience for big business. Teresa becomes pregnant and is rejected by her Greek boyfriend Nick Otranto. These occurences result in meaningful decisions.

> -Podíamos irnos de Miami, Arnaldo. Comenzar una nueva vida en otra parte. Tal vez en California.
>
> -No, Teresa, en California, como en cualquier otra ciudad,de los Estados Unidos, confrontaríamos la misma disyuntiva. O aceptar la integración a otra cultura, otra filosofía, otros valores, y ser parte de un sistema deshumanizado, regido por computadores, o vivir como personajes escapados de un libro de Kafka, desconcertados ante una realidad incomprensible sobre la cual no tendríamos control, arrastrados inexorablemente por una corriente que nos lleva al punto de partida, describiendo un círculo del cual jamás podríamos escapar.
>
> -¿Entonces - preguntó Teresa-, cuál es la respuesta, Arnaldo?
>
> -Si nuestra tierra, la de nuestros padres, nos está vedada- contestó Arnaldo-, busquemos la tierra de nuestros abuelos, Teresa. La respuesta es una sola: España. [15]

(-We could go away from Miami, Arnaldo. Begin a new life someplace else. Perhaps in California.
-No, Teresa, in California, as in any other city in the United States, we would be faced with the same alternative. Either accept the integration into another culture, another philosophy, other

> values, and be part of a dehumanized system governed by computers, or live as people who've escaped from one of Kafka's books, confused before an incomprehensible reality over which we wouldn't have control, dragged along by a current that carries us to the point of departure, describing a circle from which we could never escape.
> -Well then -asked Teresa- what is the answer, Arnaldo?
> -If our land, that of our parents is prohibited to us- answered Arnaldo, let us seek the land of our grandfathers, Teresa. There is only one answer: Spain.

This is, perhaps, the most significant conversation in the novel in terms of individual awareness. Brother and sister realize that they have been defeated in their efforts to carry out a meaningful existence. Teresa, just as Dolores and Lavinia in the other novels, is the victim of an inter-ethnic union. Arnaldo denounces an inhumane and impersonal society which is only partly to blame for their plight. They flee ironically to Franco's Spain.

On a larger scale, Arnaldo and Teresa are greatly concerned with the loss of their ethnic identity as Cubans. Neither the choice of accepting integration into another culture with all of its values and philosophies nor being part of a dehumanizing system is to their liking. They remain estranged from United States society, "desconcertados ante una realidad incomprensible sobre la cual no tendríamos control"(confused before an uncomprehensible reality over which we would have no control). Their destiny is to seek a new identity in Spain.

From this brief discussion it is possible to see that Torres-Metzgar, Soto, and Gómez Kemp are preoccupied with the results of what happens when Hispanic minorities confront the social order in the United States. The outcome is not encouraging. In the Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban exile

experiences pressures are placed on individuals to conform to existing standards rather than maintain their ethnicity within the big pot whose ingredients did not melt. From a literary point of view, the majority culture is as insensitive and as unyielding as ever.

University of Illinois-Urbana

Footnotes

1 Norman R. Yetman and C. Hoy Steele, ed., Majority and Minority: The Dynamics of Racial and Ethnic Relations (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1971) p. 12.

2 The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vol. 1. (New York: Macmillan, 1967) p. 76.

3 Dictionary of Behavioral Science (New York: Van Nostrand, 1973) p. 186.

4 Joseph Torres-Metzgar, Below the Summit (Berkeley: Tonatiuh International, 1976) p. 154.

5 Torres-Metzgar, p. 11. The conflict and outcome are quite similar to the dilemma faced by Mariana and Stiver in Chicano by Richard Vázquez.

6 Torres-Metzgar, p. 147.

7 Torres-Metzgar, p. 30.

8 Pedro Juan Soto, Hot Land, Cold Season. 1961 (New York: Dell, 1973) p. 59.

9 Soto, p. 111.

10 Soto, p. 112. Eduardo's plight is analagous to that of the protagonist of the powerful short story "In a City Called San Juan" by René Marqués who feels that he is

> ...just another shadow in that city called San Juan,

to whose heart he belonged and yet in whose midst he felt like a stranger. Why did he always return? Why this annual pilgrimage to the city of his birth, a city which, irrationally, he could not really consider his? It was more like a search for himself. As if some day he hoped to find there his own roots or meaning. Trans. Charles Pilditch. Review (Spring 1976), p. 93.

11 Soto, p. 22.

12 Soto, pp. 188-89.

13 Seymour Menton, Prose Fiction of the Cuban Revolution (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1975), p. 225.

14 Ramiro Gómez Kemp, Los desposeídos (Miami: Editorial Universal, 1972), p.11.

15 Gómez Kemp, p. 86. In Miguel F. Márquez y de la Cerra's novel, El Gallo Cantó the protagonists also become disenchanted with U.S. society and return to Cuba as antirevolutionaries.